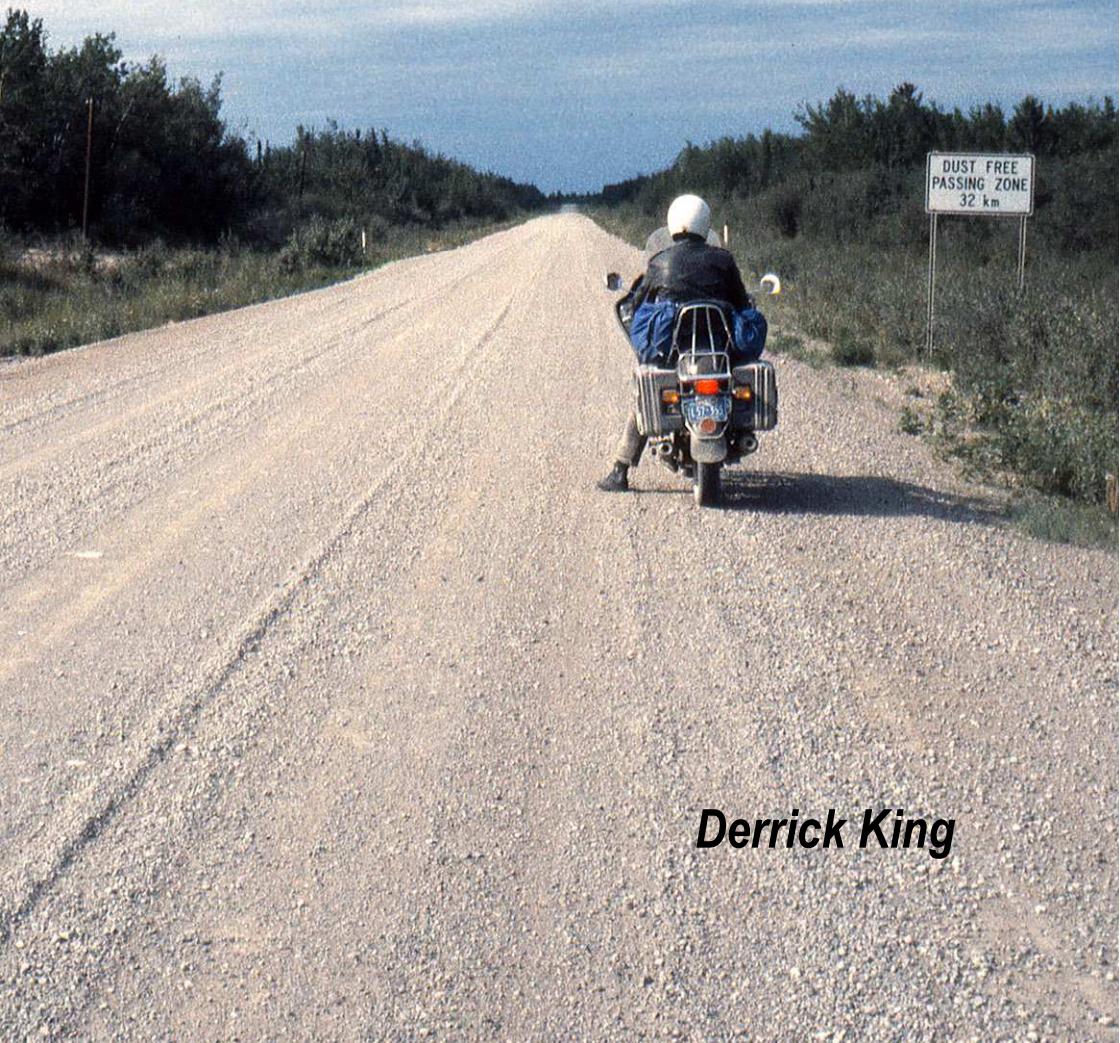


Mackenzie Highway Anniversary Ride

Yellowknife by BMW in 1982



Derrick King

Mackenzie Highway Anniversary Ride

Yellowknife by BMW in 1982

Derrick King

*Mackenzie Highway Anniversary Ride
– Yellowknife by BMW in 1982*

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ISBN 978-981-09-8770-1

*Front Cover: Calvin, Mackenzie Highway
Back Cover: Derrick, Mackenzie Highway*

*If a man knows more than others,
he becomes lonely.*

—Carl Jung

Mackenzie Highway Anniversary Ride

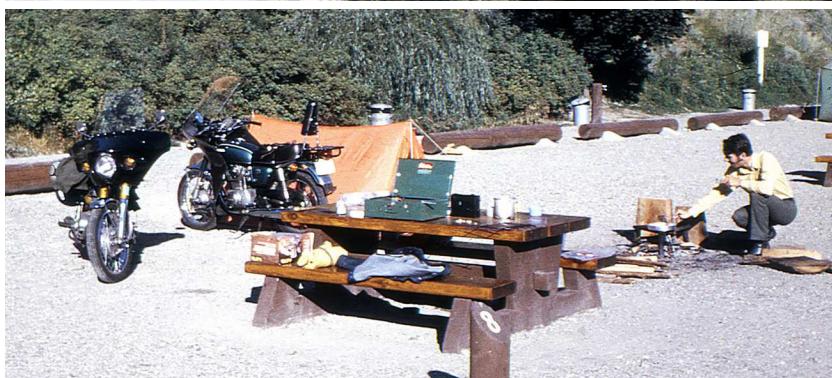
Yellowknife by BMW in 1982

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Ten Years of Motorcycle Touring

In 1982 my friend Calvin and I celebrated ten years of motorcycle touring (and friendship since primary school) by riding a ten-day 4,400 km loop, of which 1,200 km was unpaved, from Vancouver to Yellowknife, the capital of the Northwest Territories. It marked *ten years to the day* since our first motorcycle camping trip after finishing high school in 1972.



Our first motorcycle camping trip was a 1,000 km loop from Vancouver to Okanagan and Cache Creek. It was as much as our Honda CB350s could take—and as much as *we* could take on the Hondas. Even so, we remained loyal to Honda twins and both bought new CB350s the following year.

Mackenzie Highway Anniversary Ride – Yellowknife by BMW in 1982

1973, we took day trips together like this one on remote Alta Lake Road:



Today the Alta Lake road has been paved and the area fully developed:



Mackenzie Highway Anniversary Ride – Yellowknife by BMW in 1982

1974, we sold our underpowered Hondas and bought smooth, reliable BMWs. Our first tour was to Banff, Calgary, and Montana ... in winter!



We had discovered electric vests, and motorcycles big enough to run them.

Mackenzie Highway Anniversary Ride – Yellowknife by BMW in 1982

1975, we rode and camped the Kootenays. Calvin married; I was best man.



We did many other rides with wives or solo, but each year we rode together at least once and camped. No phone, no wives ... freedom as a “guy thing.”

Mackenzie Highway Anniversary Ride – Yellowknife by BMW in 1982

1976, we rode the western USA, dodging tickets. I got married—eloped.



Mackenzie Highway Anniversary Ride – Yellowknife by BMW in 1982

1977, we rode to San Francisco with our wives through the Oregon rain:



Also in 1977, we rode the scenic Kootenay-Glacier-Cascades loop together:



Mackenzie Highway Anniversary Ride – Yellowknife by BMW in 1982

Mostly bush camping, which we loved:



Sometimes in a small town motel, this one with an MGB-GT and a pickup:



Mackenzie Highway Anniversary Ride – Yellowknife by BMW in 1982

Sometimes chocolate cones:



The same Nelson Dairy Queen today in Google Streetview—still there:



Mackenzie Highway Anniversary Ride – Yellowknife by BMW in 1982

Sometimes heavy traffic:



But always beer.



We rode so many hours together that we rode in formation like fighter pilots, perfectly positioned in the lane and while passing. We turned our turn signals on and off at the same moment, as if the bikes had a radio link.

Mackenzie Highway Anniversary Ride – Yellowknife by BMW in 1982

1978, we rode the badlands of the Dakotas:



A prairie homestead, gone bust:



Mackenzie Highway Anniversary Ride – Yellowknife by BMW in 1982

A single-proprietor highway stop in 1978, outside:



And inside, with duct tape on the stools:



Mackenzie Highway Anniversary Ride – Yellowknife by BMW in 1982

Wall Drug, South Dakota, half the size it is today:



Good friends saying farewell in Nebraska:



Mackenzie Highway Anniversary Ride – Yellowknife by BMW in 1982

1979 we rode from Denver to Florida—in the rain:



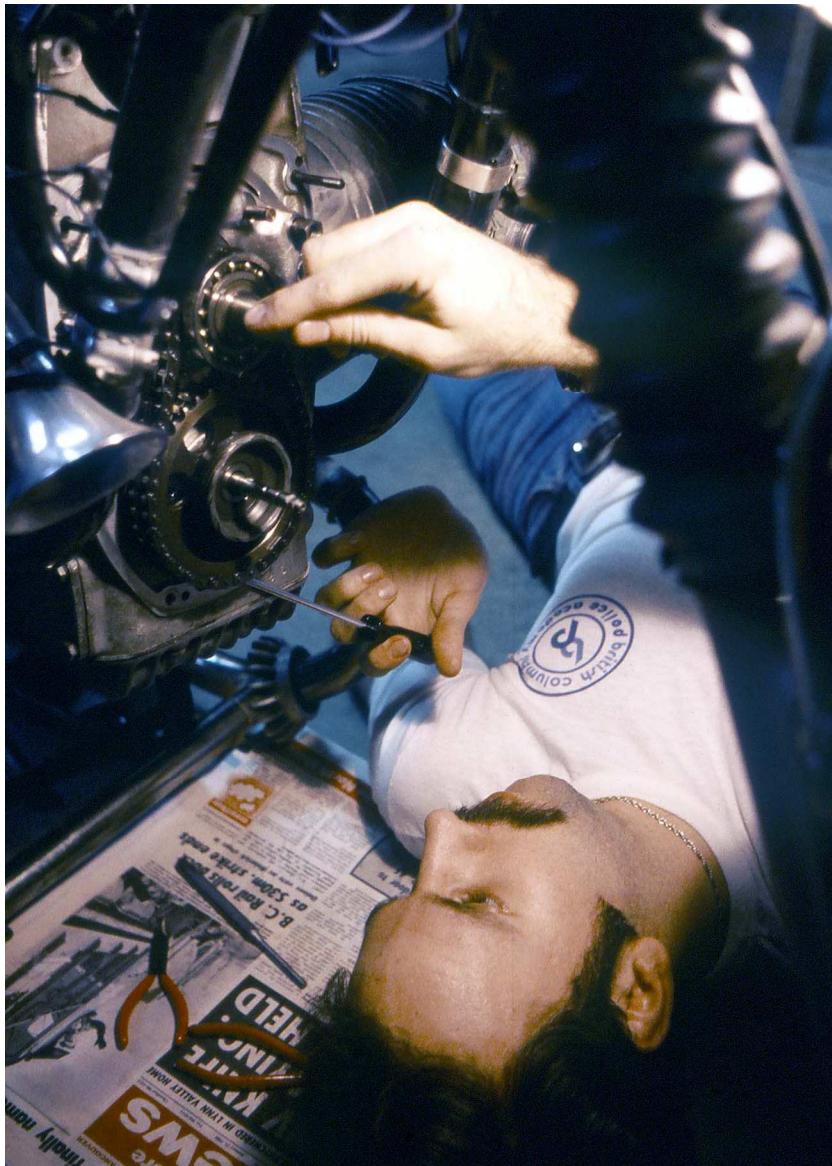
Mackenzie Highway Anniversary Ride – Yellowknife by BMW in 1982

“I think it’s clearing”



Mackenzie Highway Anniversary Ride – Yellowknife by BMW in 1982

In 1980 we overhauled our bikes but took no trips together until 1982 because our priorities changed, making other vacation budget demands.



We kept riding on our own. In 1980 I rode to Alaska, in 1981 to Mexico.

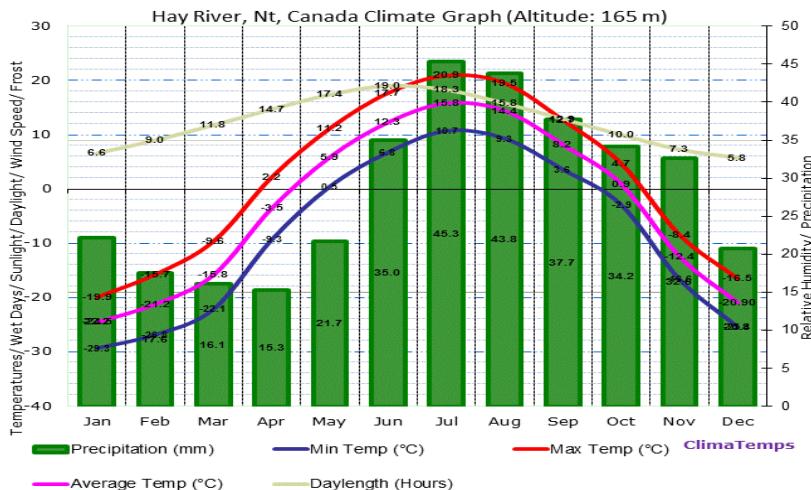
Mackenzie Highway Anniversary Ride – Yellowknife by BMW in 1982

Preparation

The Northwest Territories trip was for me the last of the Canadian provinces and territories travelled on the same motorcycle, a 750 cc 1974 BMW R75/6. The bike had accumulated 80,000 miles through every state.

Calvin rode a 600 cc 1973 BMW R60/5. The only modification to the motorcycles was the installation of a plastic bubble over the headlight. We figured that if the going got too tough for street bikes with heavy fairings on street tires, we would simply turn around and go somewhere else!

We travelled during the first ten days of July, the warmest—and wettest—time of the year, with nearly endless daylight hours:



The itinerary, as near as we can reconstruct it 33 years later, was:

Day 1: Blue River Pine Provincial Park near Clearwater. 590 km.

Day 2: Edmonton. 580 km.

Day 3: Queen Elizabeth Provincial Park at Cardinal Lake. 520 km.

Day 4: Hay River. 600 km of which 125 km unpaved.

Day 5: Yellowknife 480 km, all unpaved.

Day 6: Fort Smith. 380 km, all unpaved.

Day 7: High Level. 360 km of which 175 km unpaved.

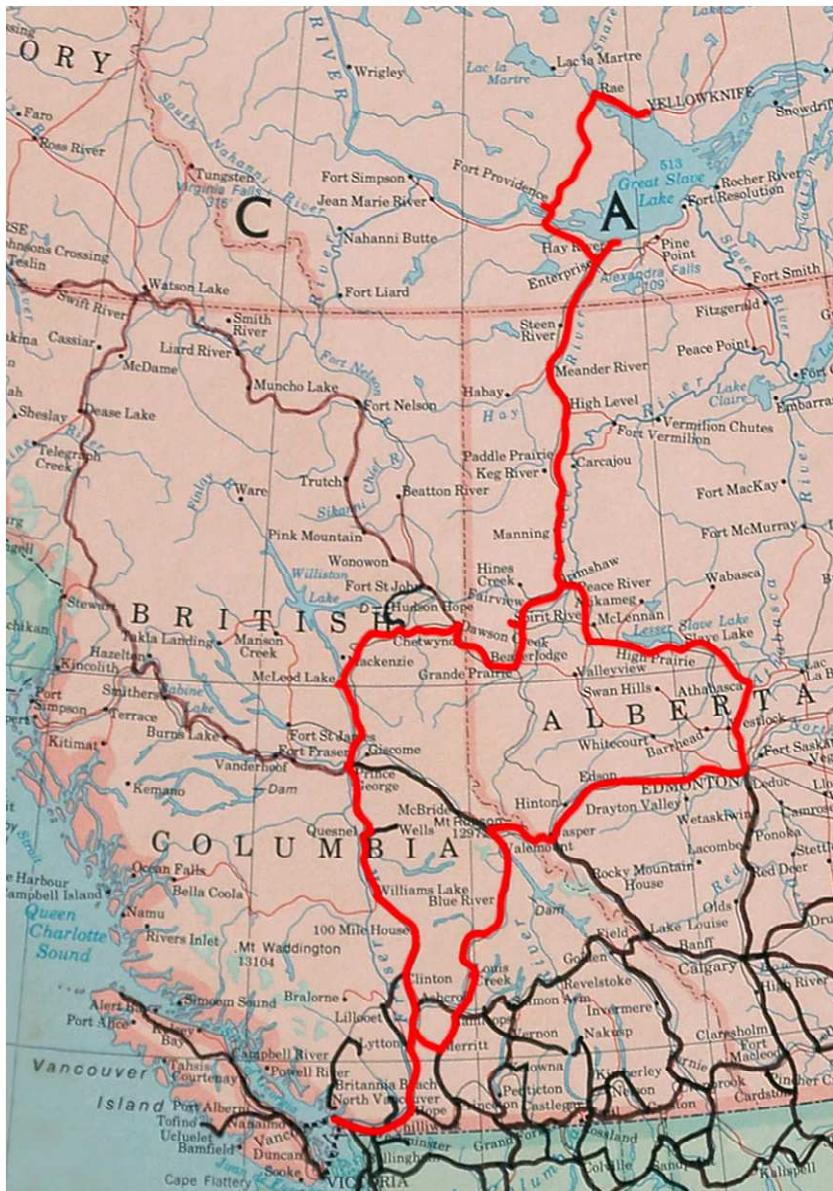
Day 8: Moberly Lake campground. 615 km.

Day 9: Quesnel. 450 km.

Day 10: Vancouver. 670 km.

Mackenzie Highway Anniversary Ride – Yellowknife by BMW in 1982

The anticlockwise route, red line, drawn on a paper map decades ago:



The black lines were previous trips on my BMW R75/6 motorcycle.

Day 1: 590 km to Clearwater

Our first stop in Merritt to visit a friend, who took this photo. Matching bikes, fairings, panniers, air horns, tailored leathers, helmets, gloves, even moustaches ... we had come a long way from matching Honda CB350s:



Camping at Blue River Pine Provincial Park:



Mackenzie Highway Anniversary Ride – Yellowknife by BMW in 1982

Day 2: 580 km to Edmonton

We stopped to pay our respects to Terry Fox, a few years younger than us:



And the same spot today, 33 years later in Google Streetview. There are streetlights now, but the trees have grown to obscure Mount Terry Fox.



We rode through to Edmonton and stayed with my brother, a graduate student, in our bedrolls on his dorm floor after a night on the town.

Day 3: 520 km to Cardinal Lake

We stopped on a side road for a toilet break, and came to a fork in the road:



We dropped coins in a pay phone to call home; there were no cellphones:



Mackenzie Highway Anniversary Ride – Yellowknife by BMW in 1982

Grimshaw, Mile Zero of the Mackenzie Highway:



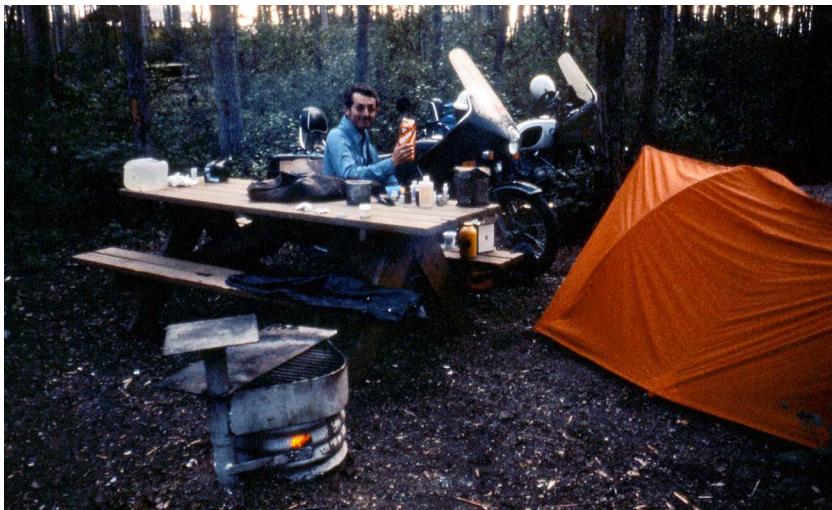
And today in 2015 in Google Streetview:



Two of the wooden grain elevators—the defining feature of all prairie towns—have been preserved.

Mackenzie Highway Anniversary Ride – Yellowknife by BMW in 1982

Camping at Cardinal Lake, Queen Elizabeth Provincial Park:



The campgrounds were unserviced, with only an outhouse. For light we had a 12V bulb connected to my motorcycle. For entertainment we had the motorcycle-sized Radio Shack AM/FM radio on the left, but we were too far from a major city to receive FM stations, only fading AM stations playing country music accompanied by static. With enough beer, that tinny radio sounded surprisingly good. Camping nights were magical—drinking, smoking, confessing, scheming, and laughing. We were unaware as we reminisced that back home our wives were mistresses.

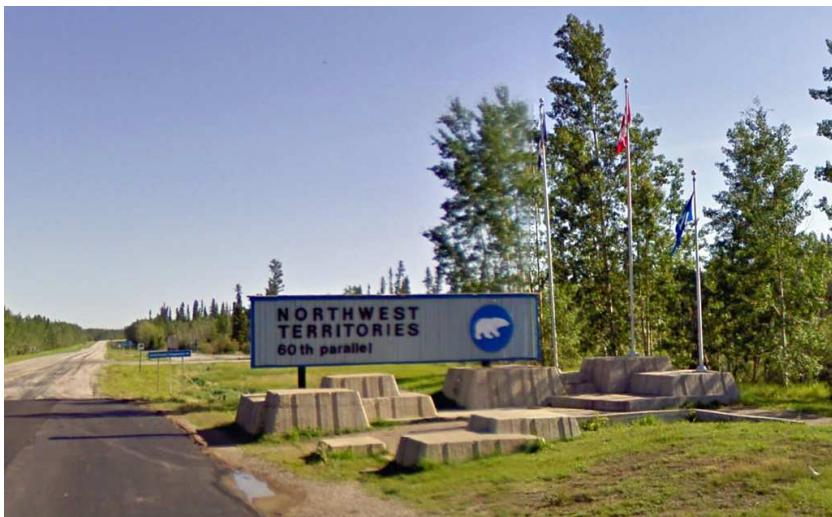


Day 4: 475 km paved, 125 km unpaved to Hay River

The Alberta—Northwest Territories border was the end of the pavement. Here, at the 60th parallel, Alberta Highway 35 becomes NWT Highway 1, called the Waterfalls Route. Just before Fort Providence the route to Yellowknife becomes Highway 3. The bikes were still shiny. Not for long!



The provincial border has not changed in 33 years:



Mackenzie Highway Anniversary Ride – Yellowknife by BMW in 1982

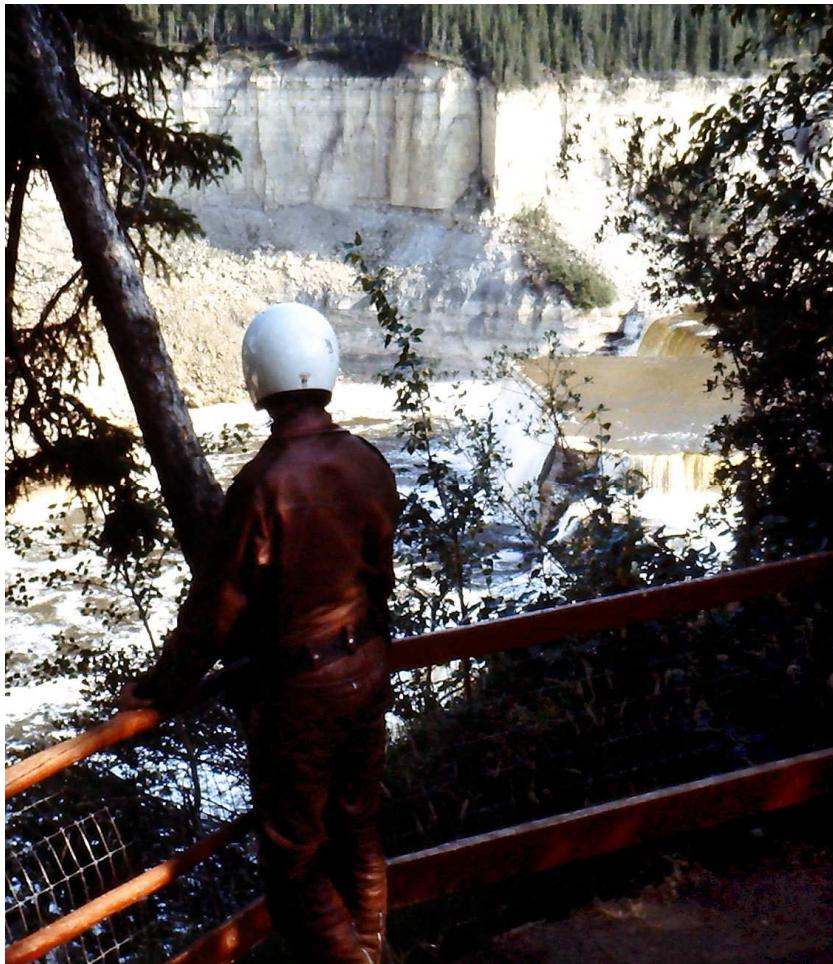
A rest stop on the way to Alexandra Falls:



The long blue bag on my bike carried a shotgun for bear insurance if we camped outside public campgrounds—which we never did, since the highway was well supplied with nearly-empty campgrounds and it was good to have a picnic table near the tent and an outhouse away from the tent. Because the route north of the border was all gravel, there were fishing tackle stores like the one above but no bus tours, few gift shops, and poor coffee. It is not for nothing that this highway is called the Waterfalls Route.



Mackenzie Highway Anniversary Ride – Yellowknife by BMW in 1982



We soon discovered the downside of July travel in the north—mosquitoes! We had never experienced such bloodthirsty hordes. If we took off our helmets when we stopped, the mosquitoes would bite through our hair. When we put the helmets back on the mosquitoes would be crushed, putting blood spots all over our hair and the inside of our helmets. To this day I shudder to think of it.

So unless we would be stopped long enough to justify a full-body coating of repellent, we left our mosquito-proof helmets and leathers on, and just put Muskol 95% DEET on our faces as Calvin is doing in the photo below.

Mackenzie Highway Anniversary Ride – Yellowknife by BMW in 1982



We camped near Hay River. Calvin fishing weeds in the Great Slave Lake:



Mackenzie Highway Anniversary Ride – Yellowknife by BMW in 1982

An RCMP constable patrolled the Hay River campground. We asked him where we could find a liquor store and learned Hay River is dry. We looked so disappointed that the policeman returned with a six pack for us.

The Midnight sun at Hay River:



Day 5: 480 km unpaved to Yellowknife

Filling up with Shell leaded gasoline—remember poisonous tetraethyl lead?



Mackenzie Highway Anniversary Ride – Yellowknife by BMW in 1982

McNallie Creek Falls in riding gear and gloves for mosquito protection:



Mackenzie Highway Anniversary Ride – Yellowknife by BMW in 1982

Then on to the Merv Hardie Ferry across the Mackenzie River to Fort Providence. It was windy—look at the horizontal wind sock—which kept the mosquitoes at bay. At last we could remove our helmets.



The ferry schedule is, simply, 06:00 to 24:00. What comes in, must go out. The Merv Hardie Ferry was replaced by the Deh Cho Bridge in 2012:



We rode onto the ferry. It was empty except for a pickup truck and a couple of crewmen. The ferry took about 15 minutes to cross the river but when it arrived on the other side the gangway didn't come down. The ferry just waited, its motor pressing the bow of the ferry against the dock. We waited and waited, sitting on the bikes with our helmets, gloves, and goggles. The crew didn't move to let down the gangway. It was if they were off duty. They looked at Calvin and me and smiled. It was surrealistic.

Fifteen minutes later an RCMP police Jeep came roaring over the top of the hill and down the unpaved road to the riverbank in a cloud of dust. It

Mackenzie Highway Anniversary Ride – Yellowknife by BMW in 1982

lurched to a halt at the ferry. Two policemen jumped out, one in uniform and the other in blue jeans. They climbed over the gangway onto the ferry and walked straight over to us.

“Police! Take your keys out of the ignition! Give them to me!” the cop in jeans shouted. After he confiscated our keys the gangway went down and the pickup on the ferry drove off. The natives in it stared at us. The policeman in jeans, holding our keys, ordered us to push our motorcycles off the ferry. That was hard work with the extra weight of the camping gear. We had to push the BMWs up a metal ramp and up onto the gravel road.

When we were off the ferry the RCMP constable asked for our papers and saw that Calvin was a police officer. They were disappointed, especially the sergeant in jeans who had worked the previous night shift and had been hauled out of bed to intercept us. It turned out that the RCMP had received a tip that bikers—the Hell’s Angels variety—were expected to come up the Mackenzie Highway carrying drugs. The ferry crew were on the lookout for Hell’s Angels. Motorcycles rarely came up that road and we were dirty, bug-bitten and as scruffy as any Hell’s Angel after riding on so much gravel. The sergeant apologized and invited us to his home for coffee. We still had over 300 km of gravel to ride to Yellowknife—and he needed to go back to sleep—so we agreed to drop by his place during our ride back.

Most of the Mackenzie Highway was like this—flat, straight, and boring:



Mackenzie Highway Anniversary Ride – Yellowknife by BMW in 1982

The surface was challenge for street tires—like riding on ball bearings—but not for the long-travel BMW suspension with its 8 inches of travel at the front and 5 at the rear. We never lost control and as our skill increased we were able to reach highway speeds, keeping far from each other so the rear bike would not eat dust. There was little traffic, so whenever a truck passed we stopped and ducked behind the windshield to avoid the hail of stones.



The sign says, "*Dust Free Passing Zone 32 km*"—32 km to a strip of asphalt! This is metric for 20 miles. The signs in Canada were changed to metric in 1977. Our speedometers read mph, so we often rode the kph in mph, going 60% faster than the speed limit. Today, staying awake would be a challenge:



Mackenzie Highway Anniversary Ride – Yellowknife by BMW in 1982

We made it! The view of downtown Yellowknife from the top of the hill of the Old Town, taken on Raccine Road near the Bush Pilots Monument:



And the view from Wiley road in 2014. The summit where I was on the bike above is a subdivision now—those houses up the hill on the left below.



Mackenzie Highway Anniversary Ride – Yellowknife by BMW in 1982

And the Old Town float plane base. Don't drink the lake water:



The sign is in English and Inuktitut, one of 11 official languages in NWT.

The float plane base in 2014:



After sightseeing on the bikes in our dusty leathers we road around and found a motel. There were fewer mosquitoes in town than on the road.

Mackenzie Highway Anniversary Ride – Yellowknife by BMW in 1982



We showered, bought a six-pack of beer to bring to the RCMP in Fort Providence—and some for us—and went for a walk around the town.

A poster on a lamp pole advertising the Texas-based Ford Brothers Kodiak Circus. It was in Yellowknife on 16 July, 1982 on what seems to have been its last peregrination around western and northern America; that's a long way to freight a load of large animals.

Another 1982 sign on the right at YK Centre: *Do Not Park Bicycles or Sleighs Along Doorways Entering Mall.*



Mackenzie Highway Anniversary Ride – Yellowknife by BMW in 1982

Franklin Avenue, the main downtown street. A 1971 Mustang “muscle car” was parked in front of the photo shop. Was it driven on gravel roads?



And the same spot in 2014 in Google Streetview.



Less litter today, otherwise little has changed here.

Mackenzie Highway Anniversary Ride – Yellowknife by BMW in 1982

But look two blocks away from the shopping center to Franklin Avenue and 52nd Street in 1982—a profitable vegetable garden instead of a decorative front lawn which would often be covered in snow:



And 2014—completely redeveloped! What used to be suburbs with summer gardens a few blocks from downtown is now downtown itself.



Mackenzie Highway Anniversary Ride – Yellowknife by BMW in 1982

Residents working in their front yard to grow vegetables back in 1982:



But the Gallery Beer Garden has survived to 2014—beer has priority:



Day 6: 380 km unpaved to Evelyn Falls Territorial Park

This must be Albert's Place on the highway:



Albert's ferocious guard dogs did not like me stopping on the highway to take a photo. Native Dene housing on the way to Rae-Edzo, renamed Behchoko in 2005:



Mackenzie Highway Anniversary Ride – Yellowknife by BMW in 1982

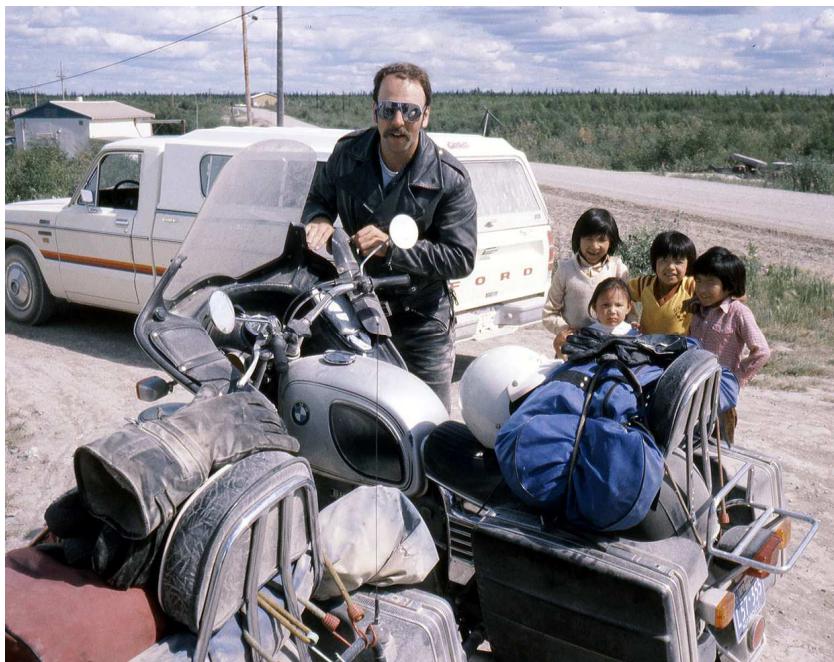
Rest break at a native craft shop in Rae, mobbed by happy Dene children who thought our thick Lewis Leather gloves would make for great boxing:



Mackenzie Highway Anniversary Ride – Yellowknife by BMW in 1982



Help! Get me out of here! I'm being chased by natives!



Mackenzie Highway Anniversary Ride – Yellowknife by BMW in 1982



Typical scenery ... when we could rise above the trees to see any scenery.



Mackenzie Highway Anniversary Ride – Yellowknife by BMW in 1982

Along the road to Fort Providence, we detoured down a side road for a toilet break, and found this remote gravel pit with an abandoned car in it.



There was silence all around. We assembled and loaded my shotgun, loaded Calvin's pistol, and used the car for target practice. We fired surplus police ammunition and a few amazingly powerful rifled slugs. By the time we were finished shooting, the car looked like Bonnie and Clyde had died in it:



Mackenzie Highway Anniversary Ride – Yellowknife by BMW in 1982

Then on to Fort Providence with a six-pack to accept the sergeant's visit invitation. Fort Providence RCMP detachment and residence in 1982:



And as the RCMP detachment looks today:



Mackenzie Highway Anniversary Ride – Yellowknife by BMW in 1982

We delivered beer to the police but we drank coffee. The sergeant and his wife were happy being stationed in Fort Providence, where enforcement work mainly involved native alcoholism. His wife was unhappy about mosquitoes but was happy to have employer-provided housing while their children were small and destructive. The sergeant thought that a taxpayer-provided four-wheel drive, snowmobile, and speedboat was fair compensation for mosquitoes, even though the mosquitoes can be so bad, he said, that they drive wildlife insane.

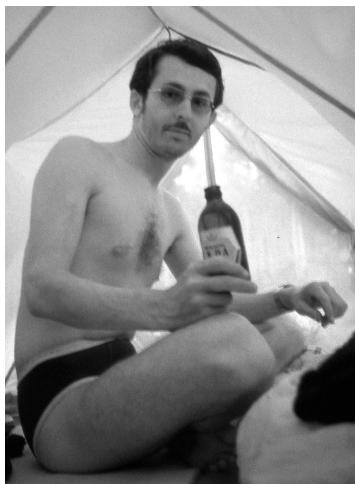
Although there was an endless supply of daylight in the north in July, we had to move forward. We went back over the Merv Hardie Ferry—the crew were friendly and smiled at us this time—and rode another couple of hours to peaceful Lady Evelyn Falls Territorial Park for camping.



Mackenzie Highway Anniversary Ride – Yellowknife by BMW in 1982

Look at the bloodthirsty mosquitoes on the tent above—they were biting ferociously. Even though it was warm, we wore our leathers and helmets while pitching the tent. Then we climbed in and spent a few minutes

swatting mosquitoes inside the tent, making it mosquito-free before undressing and wiping Muskol all over our bodies. The tent was mosquito free until toilet break time, when we had to repeat the mosquito-killing chore.



We gave up the idea of campfire cooking and spent the night inside the sanctuary of the tent drinking Molson Canadian cooled by the Kakisa river and smoking. Communion over careers and educations; dreams *vs.* regrets; flings *vs.* affairs; loves won and lost; perfidy forgiven, wrong and regretful turns, things done that shouldn't have been

done; things said that shouldn't have been said. Sharing of issues between old friends, open, intense and complete: the brotherhood of young men.

A wife, hiding Valium, passing out while riding pillion and falling off the motorcycle: how to deal with her addictions? A wife, receiving her married professor while her husband was working, leaving semen on their marital bed: report the professor to the university administration and then to the newspaper—a “sex for grades” scandal—thus ruining both careers; tolerate an open marriage; or agree some restrictions? A wife, taking six years to earn a Master’s, rarely home: ask her to contribute to the mortgage; keep on supporting her; or ask her to work part time, at least for awhile? A wife, saying after too many Harvey Wallbangers (remember those?), “There are things I tell everyone, things I tell my friends, things I tell my husband, and things I never tell anyone.”

We reviewed raw, unfiltered thoughts and experiences, as we had done growing up from teenage years. Our shared lifetimes enriched us and—as it would turn out—turned us into future relationship hazards.

There was only static on the radio. We listened to the millions of mosquitoes surrounding our tent raise a pervasive, omnidirectional whine.

Mackenzie Highway Anniversary Ride – Yellowknife by BMW in 1982

Day 7: 175 km unpaved, 185 km paved to High Level

Fishing in the morning at Lady Evelyn Falls, ten km from the campground.



Of course the falls look the same today, but now that the highway has been paved, *yoga* has replaced fishing in 2014 NWT government advertising:



Mackenzie Highway Anniversary Ride – Yellowknife by BMW in 1982

Wearing leathers for mosquito protection, Calvin and I caught northern pike using a Daiwa Minicast spinning rod. It was difficult to get the hooks out of the mouths of these nasty carnivores without getting bitten.



Then we packed up to enjoy the last 175 km of gravel back to the paved roads south of the Northwest Territories – Alberta border.

Mackenzie Highway Anniversary Ride – Yellowknife by BMW in 1982



Mackenzie Highway Anniversary Ride – Yellowknife by BMW in 1982

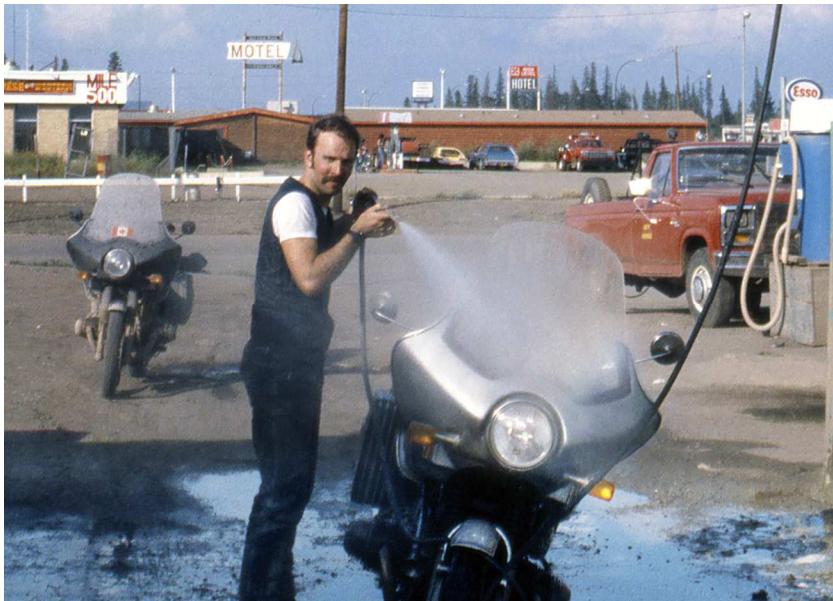


Mackenzie Highway Anniversary Ride – Yellowknife by BMW in 1982

Riding on pavement after riding 1,200 km on gravel is a like walking ashore after several days at sea on a sailboat. It takes awhile to lose one's sea legs.



I hated to wash the bike after a bush ride—dirt is a hard-won trophy—but a clean bike is a well-maintained bike. So we found a motel room and a pressure wash at High Level to wash the bikes and our leather riding suits.

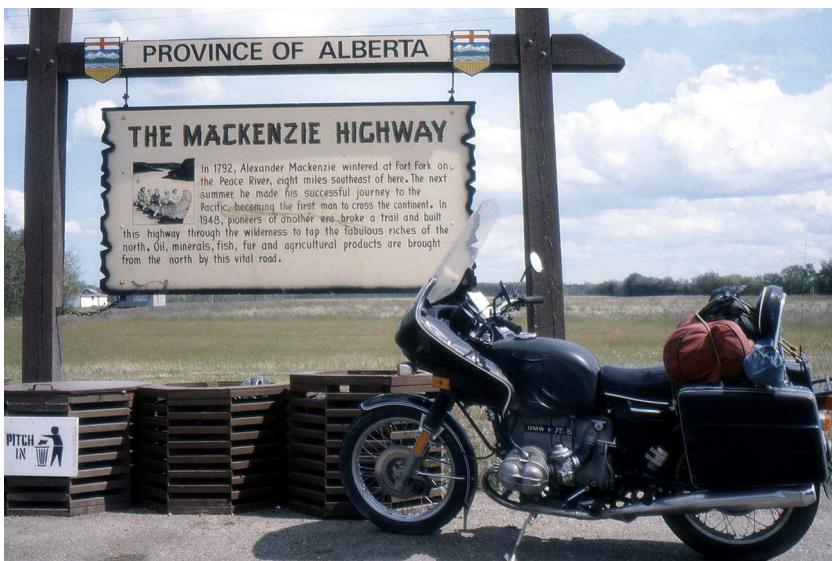


Day 8: 615 km to Moberly Lake

The day started clear and bright on a good road, albeit flat and boring near the speed limit. The RCMP had been using the moving radar technology for several years, and all we could do was slow down whenever any vehicle approached from any direction. Fortunately, there weren't many vehicles!



We rode through the peaceful Peace River country.



Mackenzie Highway Anniversary Ride – Yellowknife by BMW in 1982

And across the Dunvegan Bridge on the Peace River and into Spirit River:



The same spot today on Google Streetview:



The Peace River is less visible today even from the side of the highway next to the river because the trees near the river are taller, the river is lower, and the light is different.

Mackenzie Highway Anniversary Ride – Yellowknife by BMW in 1982

Spirit River, from 50th Street and 47 Avenue, just east of the post office:



And the same spot in 2014, no grain elevators or tracks—what a change!



The new skyline is a sign of progress, but the old skyline looked better.

Mackenzie Highway Anniversary Ride – Yellowknife by BMW in 1982

While researching this book I learned that the local grain elevators did not have the capacity to load 100-car trains, so larger, central elevators were built, like the one below in Rycroft. The old wooden elevators were a fire hazard and insurance risk and were on land leased from the railway, so most were demolished and their tracks pulled up and scrapped.



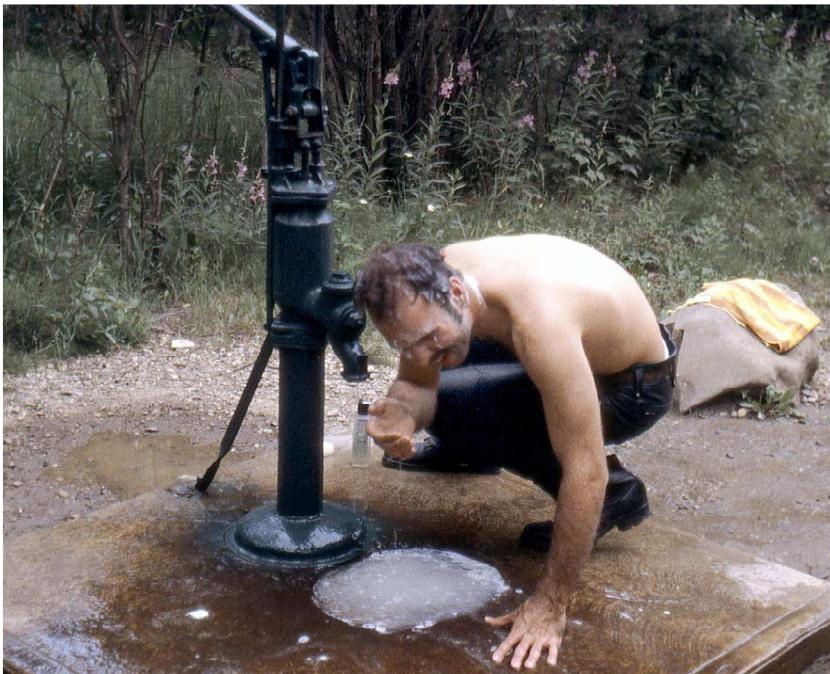
Prairie—as flat as it gets—but fewer mosquitoes than the northern tundra:



Mackenzie Highway Anniversary Ride – Yellowknife by BMW in 1982



Under gradually thickening clouds we rode on to a public campground near Moberly Lake, with outhouses and hand-pumped, ice-cold well water.



Mackenzie Highway Anniversary Ride – Yellowknife by BMW in 1982

We had most of the campground to ourselves, a last opportunity to drink, smoke, and talk as old friends. *As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another*—Proverbs.

It started to rain after we were settled in the tent, and there are few sounds more soothing than the three-dimensional sound of raindrops pattering gently on a nylon tent.

During the night we were awakened by a *CRASH!* I had never seen anyone move faster than Calvin as he unzipped the tent and ran out into the pouring rain and mud in his bare feet and underpants to pick up his motorcycle. The clay under its centerstand had liquefied in the rain and his BMW had fallen over. I had put a board under my centerstand so my bike was secure. Fortunately we always made sure that the motorcycles were parked at a safe distance from the tent and from each other.

Motorcyclists say a clean bike brings rain—and ours had just been washed!

Day 9: 450 km to Quesnel



We climbed out of soggy sleeping bags, broke camp in wet clothes, and rode all day in torrential rain. Luckily the rain was on paved highway, not gravel.

Mackenzie Highway Anniversary Ride – Yellowknife by BMW in 1982

“I think it’s clearing”



Mackenzie Highway Anniversary Ride – Yellowknife by BMW in 1982

We were soaked, but thanks to electric vests we were not cold. We rode as far as we could, to a motel in Quesnel. We strung clotheslines across the room, hung up our gear, turned up the heat, and tried to dry it out.



Day 10: 670 km to Vancouver

The ride home on the familiar, wonderful Cariboo and Fraser Canyon highways in damp clothing was dry, uneventful, and safe.

Looking Back

Today, the entire route is paved. Except for mosquitoes and camping, a motorcyclist would have to go farther than Yellowknife to find challenging road adventure. Calvin still owns and rides the 1973 R60/5 but my 1974 R75/6 no longer exists; it was wrecked in a deer strike in 1988.

Our hypergamist wives received their Master's degrees after being supported by us for many years and moved out; Calvin and I had served our purpose. We became single at the same time. Our ex-wives played their gender well; their new old-enough-to-be-her-father lover/sponsor/mentors guided them on to PhDs and careers, although they remained childless. One upgraded from mistress to wife after a decade in the shadows.

As men we had no upgrading prospects. We imported wives, hoping for traditional values. We then realized the other knew too much about our past: teenage chums had morphed into the drinking buddies a man would never want his wife to meet. To paraphrase Jung, "*When a man knows more than others, he becomes dangerous.*" Each other's past put his future with his new old-fashioned wife—who would not understand such things—at risk. Avoiding another divorce mattered more than riding and past adventures.

Our tenth anniversary ride was our last. After half a lifetime we separated and never rode together again. We stay in touch by email, and collaborated on this book by email, but have not seen each other in 25 years.

